

# **The Gaza Strip: A Primer**

**An Intelligence Assessment**

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## An Intelligence Assessment

*Information as of 16 March 1979 has been used  
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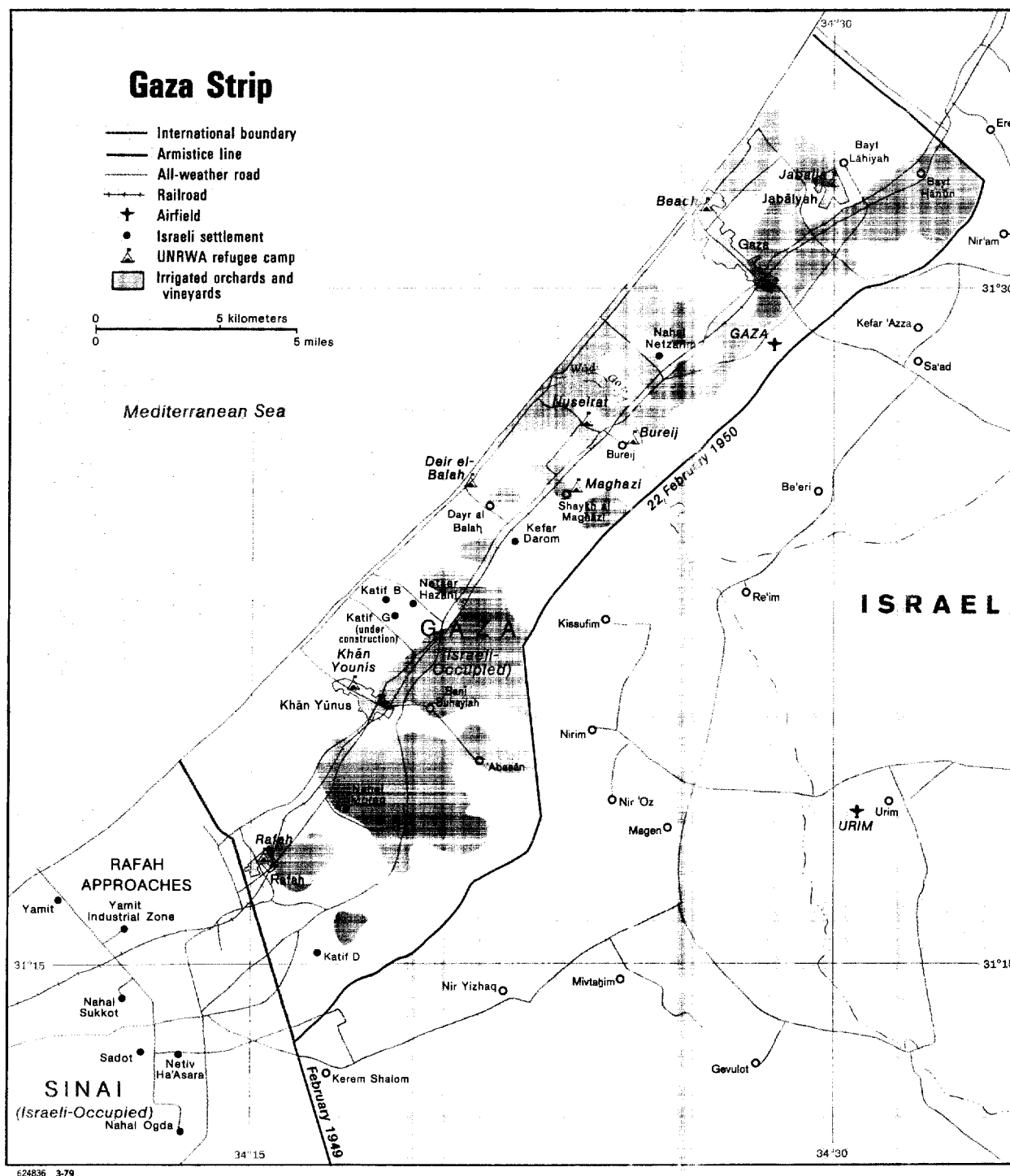
**The Gaza Strip:  
A Primer****Summary**

While the Israeli-Egyptian peace negotiations have tended to address Gaza and the West Bank together, the two areas are quite different. For example, an estimated 80 percent of Gaza's more than 400,000 residents are Palestinian refugees—or their offspring—and about 44 percent of the West Bank's 700,000 residents are refugees. Gaza is also a political anomaly. Once a district of Palestine, the area has since 1948 been a questionable spoil of war detached from any larger entity. Today Israel administers Gaza, but does not regard it in the same emotional or historical light as it does the West Bank. Nevertheless, Israel, for security reasons, believes it must retain a military presence in Gaza for the indefinite future. Egypt advances no claim to sovereignty over Gaza, yet it considers Gaza its responsibility because of its former role as administrator of the territory.

President Sadat's search for creditable Palestinian residents of the West Bank and Gaza to participate in negotiations to establish a local self-governing entity has so far been unsuccessful. The traditional Gazan elite—led by members of the Shawwa clan—is tempted by the offer of autonomy, but it is shackled by refugee support for the Palestine Liberation Organization, which opposes the accords. Political dynamics in Gaza are essentially a struggle between these two groups. The PLO hardliners so far have the upper hand on the question of negotiations by reason of their numbers and their ability to intimidate opponents.

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President Sadat talks of negotiating a *comprehensive* settlement with Israel, even if King Husayn of Jordan "does not accept his responsibility." Sadat's meaning is vague, but he presumably intends, at least in part, to see that a local self-governing entity is established in Gaza, where he can legitimately claim to play a role. Success will depend on Sadat's finding local Arabs willing to participate in the negotiations.

No individuals who have a credible political base in Gaza have so far come forward. We believe, however, that there are Gazan politicians who are tempted to do so. It is, therefore, possible that Sadat will be able to proceed with negotiations for the autonomy of Gaza, offering the results as a model for what might be achieved on the West Bank. This paper is intended to serve both as a primer on the Gaza Strip and as an assessment of its political dynamics, in anticipation of negotiations to resolve its status.

**History**

Before 15 May 1948 the Gaza district of Palestine comprised the entire southern half of the country and, as a part of Palestine, was administered by the United Kingdom under a mandate from the League of Nations. On 15 May 1948 the British mandate was terminated and the Arab-Israeli war began. Egyptian forces entered Gaza city, which became the headquarters of the Egyptian expeditionary force in Palestine. The area of Egyptian control was reduced by the fighting to a narrow strip of coastal territory 25 miles long that became known as the Gaza Strip. Its borders were demarcated in the Egyptian-Israeli armistice of 24 February 1950; its southwestern limit was the prewar boundary between Egypt and Palestine.

During the 1948 fighting, the Strip became a haven for Palestinian refugees. Egypt did not annex the territory after the armistice, but administered it through governors whose rule is remembered as harsh.

Between 1949 and 1956 there was a gradual escalation of violence between inhabitants of Gaza and the neighboring Israelis. Israel temporarily occupied the area during the 1956 war, but relinquished control to Egypt in March 1957 under US and UN pressure.

Anti-Israeli activity accelerated in the Strip in the mid-1960s with the formation of the Palestine Liberation Organization. The Palestine Liberation Army, Fatah, and the forerunner of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine were all active in mobilizing the population against Israel up to and during the 1967 war. After the Israelis occupied the Strip in 1967, these groups went underground and used the refugee camps as bases for attacks on the occupation forces. Israel crushed the guerrillas in 1971 and rooted out the PLO organization. Armed resistance has since mostly ceased in the Gaza Strip.

Israel regards the Gaza Strip as an anomaly. In its view it has neither the emotional and historical associations of the West Bank nor is it part of Egypt. But because of its proximity to Israel's populous coastal plain, Israeli leaders strongly believe they must retain some measure of control over the area to prevent it from again becoming a staging base for Palestinian terrorist attacks.

Egypt presently considers Gaza its responsibility until Gaza achieves self-determination as part of an independent Palestinian state or as a self-governing entity. Cairo does not include annexation of the Strip among the options available to Egypt, in part because of the large refugee population in Gaza.

Jordan, which took control of and ultimately annexed the West Bank portion of Palestine after the 1948 war, maintains economic links with Gaza, but advances no claims of sovereignty.

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**Pro-PLO Sentiment**

A major consideration for Rashid Shawwa must be the attitude of the Palestinian refugees (over 300,000) in Gaza. Most are pro-PLO, and it is doubtful that an effective governing body could be formed without their cooperation. Pro-PLO Gazans tend to repeat publicly the hardline PLO position opposing Camp David, but we suspect some are concerned about being left behind by the peace process. [REDACTED]

The exact strength of pro-PLO sentiment in Gaza is difficult to measure. Israel destroyed the formal PLO organization in the camps during its crackdown in 1971, and it is not likely to allow a reestablishment as long as Israel has a political role in the territory. Some covert organization may still be present. [REDACTED]

The PLO viewpoint today is often expressed through the Red Crescent Society, the Muslim counterpart of the Red Cross. The society is led by two native Gazans who were former members of the PLO Supreme Council of Gaza, Dr. Haydar Abd al-Shafi and Ibrahim Abu Sitah. [REDACTED]

Abd al-Shafi is president of the Red Crescent and on the board of trustees for Bir Zeit University, the only four-year university on the West Bank and a center of PLO support. Abd al-Shafi is a longtime political rival of Rashid Shawwa. He severed his official connection with the PLO in the early 1970s in order to avoid being deported from Gaza by the Israelis. [REDACTED]

Abu Sitah is another longtime PLO official and a former member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine National Congress. Israel linked him to bombings in 1969 and deported him from Gaza. He remains active in Gazan affairs and is believed to have been allowed to return to Gaza. [REDACTED]

Other sources of pro-PLO sentiment in Gaza are Zuhair el-Rayyes, a lawyer and editor of the pro-PLO Jerusalem daily, *al-Fajr*, and Fayyez abu Rahme, head of the Gazan bar association. El Rayyes is a friend of Rahme — [REDACTED] a Communist—and a close collaborator of al-Shafi. El Rayyes' family reportedly controlled Gazan politics during the Egyptian occupation when many of the Shawwa family were imprisoned. [REDACTED]

The first prerequisite Shawwa has attached to his own participation in a Gaza autonomous regime is that it must have "real substance," including in probable order of importance:

- Arab control over Gaza water sources and state lands.
- A moratorium on new Israeli settlements.
- An Egyptian liaison office and security force.
- A more effective Arab-controlled Gaza police force than the area's current ragtag outfit.
- Arab control of the Gaza civil administration.
- An end to the Israeli veto on Gazan development projects. [REDACTED]

In addition, Shawwa wants Egypt and Israel to appear to impose autonomy in Gaza. By this line of reasoning, the two countries would conclude their negotiations over the powers of the self-governing authority and then declare their intention to implement the arrangements with or without the participation of Shawwa and other major Gazan leaders. [REDACTED]

Shawwa would argue with the PLO that he joined the autonomous regime in order to prevent a takeover by nonentities or Israeli collaborators. [REDACTED]

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### Pro-Egyptian Sentiment

Pro-Egyptian opinion in Gaza is much less strong than pro-PLO opinion. It is fostered by Gazan access to Egyptian universities and by an overriding desire to end the Israeli occupation, which translates into support for Sadat's peace policies. Shawwa clan leaders and some mayors support Sadat's peace initiative, though political realities preclude their publicly taking that position. Sheik Hashim al-Khazeidar, the Imam of Gaza, is Sadat's most outspoken supporter, and he led a delegation to Cairo following Sadat's trip to Jerusalem. Rashid Shawwa refused to participate unless the PLO approved. They did not and instead accused Khazeidar of being an "Israeli stooge." Israel has indeed boosted Khazeidar—they appointed him Imam—and he has little standing in Gazan politics. [REDACTED]

### UNRWA

The local Arab administrators of the UNRWA program, who are relatively free of both Israeli influence and that of the traditional power structure, constitute another political force in Gaza. The UNRWA group's importance would probably increase if Gaza were faced with the practical problems of self-government because UNRWA has the experience and machinery to administer the area. [REDACTED]

Local UNRWA officials are drawn almost exclusively from among the refugees. They preside over a multimillion-dollar operation that is in constant touch with the population through the administration of schools and hospitals; control of housing, food, and vocational training; and the dispensation of considerable patronage. It is the most thoroughly organized, largest, and best funded administrative structure in the Strip. [REDACTED]

UNRWA was established in December 1949 by the United Nations General Assembly to assist persons in the Gaza area, West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria who were displaced by the Arab-Israeli conflict. Field work began in May 1950. The agency serves all eligible refugees whether or not they live in the camps. UNRWA services are supplied directly to individuals, not through the governing authority. [REDACTED]

### US Presence

The United States has no official presence in Gaza, but it is active in providing aid through the UN and various private relief agencies. US assistance for the West Bank and Gaza began in fiscal year 1975 under the Middle East Special Requirements Fund, established after the 1973 war. Funding for West Bank and Gaza development projects has in recent years been set at \$3 million. [REDACTED]

The aid program is a bilateral US-Arab effort, and assistance is channeled through US voluntary agencies, not the Israeli Government. The principal agencies involved are the Catholic Relief Services and the American Near East Refugee Aid. [REDACTED]

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